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*From Admiral Turner,*

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STANSFIELD TURNER  
CONSULTANT

(703) 553-2863  
SUITE 1200  
2361 S. JEFFERSON DAVIS HWY.  
ARLINGTON, VA 22202

(703) 522-5258  
1320 SKIPWITH ROAD  
MCLEAN, VIRGINIA 22101

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# THE 'FOLLY' OF THE MX MISSILE

*Our latest ballistic weapon, argues a former C.I.A. director, makes sense only as the instrument of a nuclear war fighting strategy whose adoption would threaten America's security.*

**By Stansfield Turner**

**T**he United States has reached a watershed in its nuclear defense strategy. President Reagan and Congress are trying to decide what to do about the MX, the new intercontinental ballistic missile that is larger, more expensive, more powerful and more accurate than anything in our military arsenal. The issue, however, goes beyond the costs and proficiency of a new weapons system. The question is whether deploying the MX would enhance our security or detract from it.

For several years now, the immediate problem with the MX has been how to base it. Placed in existing silos, it would be vulnerable to surprise attack by the Soviet Union's beefed-up strategic forces — just as vulnerable as our present generation of land-based missiles. There have been various schemes for making the MX less vulnerable, including the ingenious "dense pack" notion of placing them so close together that incoming Soviet missiles would knock each other out. These proposals have all been fended off or left in abeyance, largely on the instinct, shared by Congress and the public, that the ideas made little sense. Yet it is unlikely that any-

one will be able to find a basing scheme any more acceptable than dense pack, not even the special commission of experts appointed by the President to study the problem. Only two weeks ago, several alternative basing schemes that seem to be no more practical than dense pack were offered by the Congressional Research Service, an agency specializing in analysis for Capitol Hill. One of these was to place the missiles in planes that can remain airborne for long periods. Another was to dump the missiles into the oceans in canisters at times of tension, and to trigger them by remote control.

It is apparent that any basing solution for this large a missile is going to require highly unusual procedures and will be highly controversial. In this circumstance, it is only natural to ask whether the MX missile is essential to our national security. Are there no alternatives? Reaching a judgment on this life-or-death issue, it seems to me, involves two basic questions:

(1) What kind of nuclear capability do we need? Do we want an ability to retaliate against Soviet cities? Or do we seek the capacity to destroy the Soviet Union's principal military targets?

(2) How large a nuclear force do we require? Must it be bigger than the Soviet Union's, or about the same, or can it be smaller and still suffice?

How our leaders answer these questions will determine whether we proceed toward greater stability in the "balance of terror" between the United States and the Soviet Union or toward heightened instability, with all the new dangers that would entail.

There are, as we know, four types of delivery systems in our nuclear-weapons arsenal.

First, there are the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's) — large, land-based, relatively immobile missiles that travel to their targets by leaving the earth's atmosphere and re-entering it on a precalculated trajectory.

Then there are the submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM's), which follow the same trajectory as the ICBM's but are based in specially designed, nuclear-powered submarines.

Third, we have the bombers — traditional, large, long-range aircraft, such as the B-52's, the core of our bomber force — carrying nuclear bombs.

Finally, there are those recent additions to our inventory, the cruise missiles — unmanned small aircraft that are transported to their launch points on bombers, submarines or trucks and that fly at a very low altitude.

Of these four systems, the land-based missiles are the most vulnerable to a Soviet attack and the submarines the least vulnerable. We

will never be a perfectly invulnerable weapons system, and trying to achieve one will be progressively difficult in the future. We must, instead, count on making it so complicated for the Russians to knock out all our nuclear forces in a short period of time that they will never feel confident of their ability to do it.

The way to increase survivability is to emphasize mobility, numbers of weapons and concealment. Bombers are mobile, and reasonably safe from attack when on airborne alert. Submarines are mobile and readily concealed at sea. Even if there should be a breakthrough in submarine detection — and no such breakthrough is foreseeable at present — submarines will certainly remain more difficult to locate than ICBM's or bombers. Cruise missiles are mobile, and small enough to be concealed, and we could have large numbers of them. Thus, for assurance that we won't be knocked out by surprise, our intercontinental nuclear forces should be built around these three systems.

*Adm. Stansfield Turner, U.S.N., retired, Director of Central Intelligence from 1977 to 1981, is a consultant and lecturer on international affairs.*

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What I am proposing, therefore, is a shift of emphasis in our mix of nuclear weapons — a shift away from large ICBM's, like our present land-based missiles and the projected MX, to small, multibased cruise missiles.

Such a move would not only make our deterrent forces more survivable but would serve to reduce the elements of instability in the American-Soviet nuclear confrontation. For the more we rely on ICBM's, the more nervous we will be about the threat of a surprise attack on them; our finger will have to be on the trigger. And because the MX — added to the capability of our existing ICBM's — would give us the potential for a surprise attack on Soviet ICBM's, it would make the Russians nervous; their finger, too, would have to be on the trigger. Cruise missiles, on the other hand, are too slow to threaten a surprise attack and too small to be targeted in a surprise attack by the Russians. Hence, if the United States shifted away from ICBM's and toward cruise missiles, both sides would relax somewhat and the nuclear balance would be stabilized.

The same combination would also give us as much assurance as possible that our weapons would penetrate any Soviet defense. The Russians would have to construct both ballistic missile defenses (against our submarine-launched missiles) and antiaircraft defenses (against bombers and cruise missiles traveling in the atmosphere). Both sets of defenses would have to be nearly impregnable.

It is true that because cruise missiles are small and easily concealed, it would be very difficult to verify the number of these weapons deployed by each side. Because of this, it is sometimes argued that shifting to cruise missiles would kill the chances for a new strategic arms-control agreement and thus increase tensions. But that is a specious argument.

**T**he key objective of arms control is not control of the number of weapons but a lessening of the likelihood of anyone starting a nuclear war, either deliberately or accidentally. The critical step toward that goal is a reduction of the number of weapons that put people on edge by posing the threat of a surprise attack — and those weapons, by and large, are the ICBM's. There is no reason why ICBM's cannot be controlled by agreement — and bombers and submarines as well — even if cruise missiles cannot be counted.

The fundamental choice, then, is not between weapons of greater or lesser potency but between greater stability or less. The so-called nuclear experts, however, are finding it difficult to shed conventional military thinking, which sees advantages in "superiority" in weapons and holds that defeating the enemy's military forces is the end objective if war should break out.

Such emphasis on the power and number of weapons is misplaced. The levels of damage in intercontinental nuclear war are likely to be so high that most of the weapons we and the Russians possess will exceed any conceivable usefulness. A common nuclear weapon today has an explosive power about 40 times greater than the bomb that killed 100,000 people in Hiroshima. The United States and the Soviet Union each has about 270 urban areas with a population of more than 100,000. Imagine what several hundred such warheads could do to either country.

The United States has about 9,500 nuclear warheads and the Soviet Union about 8,000, all capable of being delivered over intercontinental distances. Some of these warheads are powerful and accurate enough to destroy "hard" targets, like ICBM silos, which are built of reinforced concrete. The remainder of these warheads are

only capable of destroying "soft" targets, like cities, industries and basic military facilities. Some of the systems could hit their targets very quickly, because their time of flight to the Soviet Union is quite short and because the communications link to them is swift and sure. Others either have relatively long flight times or, in the case of submarines, are not always within reach of quick communications.

The advantage of the large land-based missiles is that they can not only hit "hard" targets but get there fast. Bombers and cruise missiles, while also capable of destroying "hard" targets, would take longer to reach their objectives. And we cannot be sure how long it will take for our nuclear-armed submarines to receive instructions and carry them out; furthermore, submarine-launched missiles are not accurate enough to be effective against "hard" targets. By about 1990, however, the undersea system will become as accurate as the other three, and the principal distinction between the four systems, in terms of their striking power, will be that bombers and cruise missiles will take longer to get there and submarine-based missiles may take longer to be launched. What difference will that make?

The question is of fundamental importance. For the answer determines which of two basic nuclear doctrines or strategies we adopt.

The first is the doctrine of retaliation. The two premises here are that we can deter the Russians from attacking us with nuclear weapons by the threat of a devastating nuclear counterblow against their urban and industrial centers; and that if, against all rational expectations, deterrence fails, we require only a limited capability to fight an intercontinental nuclear war.

The second is the doctrine of nuclear-war fighting. The premises here are that we can deter the Russians only if

we are capable of waging and "prevailing" in a nuclear war; and that we require a capability to outlast the Russians in protracted nuclear war if deterrence fails.

The most critical point in deciding between these different approaches is which is the more likely to prevent the outbreak of intercontinental nuclear hostilities.

For many years, the United States relied on the first doctrine — that an assured capability to retaliate with nuclear weapons provided adequate deterrence. This view rested on the enormous destructiveness of nuclear weapons and the very high probability that they would penetrate enemy defenses. Today, there is no meaningful defense against ballistic missiles and little against cruise missiles; only bombers are vulnerable to serious attrition. Defenses will improve in the future, but since only a few nuclear weapons need arrive on target to do high levels of damage, defense will continue to be a difficult proposition.

What this means is that any Soviet leader contemplating initiating nuclear war must do more than estimate whether his nuclear forces could do greater damage to the United States than ours could do to the Soviet Union, or whether he could destroy all American nuclear forces and still have some of his own left. He must ask what might be the absolute level of damage to the Soviet Union. There would be little satisfaction to him in doing more damage to the United States or eliminating our nuclear strength if the damage suffered by the Soviet Union were unbearable.

This kind of calculation — that a preponderance of nuclear force is meaningless if the opponent retains the capacity for massive retaliation — is, of course, an entirely new way of looking at wars, and it is probably because of its newness that it came under challenge in the United States some years ago. As one

critic, Colin S. Gray, put the argument in an article last fall, "Deterrence cannot be simply based upon the ability to bring on a holocaust." "For a threat to be believable, and thus an effective deterrent," he wrote, "it has to posit purposive military actions, and those actions have to be directed against targets that are of very high value to Soviet leaders."

More specifically, Mr. Gray and others of his persuasion worry about what would happen if the Soviet leaders were to unleash a nuclear attack aimed not at America's cities but at its nuclear forces. Their contention is that no American President would be likely to implement the longstanding doctrine of retaliation against Soviet cities, because he would know that this would invite the devastation of American cities by the Soviet Union's remaining store of missiles. Out of such reasoning the war-fighting doctrine was born.

This doctrine says we need nuclear forces powerful enough not only to devastate the Soviet Union's cities but to destroy its intercontinental nuclear forces, however long it takes. Such a capability, it is argued, would place the Soviet leaders in the position of knowing that they could not prevail if they were to start a nuclear war with the United States.

In my view, the doctrine of nuclear war-fighting is wrong in denying the credibility of the threat of retaliation against Soviet cities and in resting on the contention that the Soviet leaders might order a strike at our nuclear forces in the belief that the American President was not likely to retaliate with a blow against Soviet cities. What this overlooks is the great uncertainty as to how anyone would react in such a situation. There is no precedent on which to base a judgment.

Can anyone say with any certainty that a President would not launch all the

weapons we have if the Russians were to launch even a limited attack on our nuclear weapons sites? Rationality may not prevail in such circumstances; or the President may react before it is clear that the attack is of a limited nature; or he may act in the belief that the Russians had launched a full-scale attack; or he may believe that any nuclear war is bound to escalate, and that our best move is to go all-out right away and hope to limit the Russians' ability to strike a second time.

Beyond guessing how the President might react, the Russians would have to worry about a complete breakdown in our chain of command. What would the commanders of our nuclear submarines do if, knowing that the United States had been attacked, they lost all contact with headquarters? Just half a dozen submarines could place almost 1,000 nuclear warheads on the Soviet Union.

In short, any neat calculation as to how the United States might respond could be wrong in so many ways that no Soviet leader could feel confident of the outcome of his launching even a small-scale nuclear attack on our country. Even gamblers grow cautious as the stakes rise, and a Soviet leader contemplating a nuclear attack on the United States would know that he would be gambling the very survival of his society. In my view, only if we were to push the Soviet Union into a desperate situation threatening its existence as a Communist state could a Soviet leader conceivably decide on the gamble of a nuclear attack on the United States.

The war-fighting school also argues that the Russians are going ahead on their own to build a nuclear war-fighting capability; that this makes nuclear war a likely eventuality; and that the Russians can be deterred from initiating such a war only if we demonstrate to them that we have the same

kind of capability and could successfully outfight them in such a conflict.

There is ample evidence that the Russians are making very substantial investments in intercontinental nuclear forces, and that they are paying attention to all the components of a war-fighting capability. There is a world of difference, however, between preparing for the possibility of nuclear war and preparing deliberately to start one. Nothing I have seen persuades me that the Soviet leaders' intention in building their nuclear war machine is to use it offensively.

In any case, we don't have to go beyond a strategy of retaliation to be able to wage war against the Soviet Union's nuclear forces, if forced to. We already have a considerable capacity to engage in that kind of conflict. As I have noted, all of our four nuclear weapons systems are either capable of striking hard military targets or will acquire that capability before long. A President, then, could choose to retaliate only against cities, or only against hardened targets, or against both.

What he could not do with the bombers, cruise missiles and submarine-based missiles is to strike back rapidly. The key difference between the war-fighting concept and the retaliatory strategy hinges on whether we need an ability to retaliate quickly. If we do, ICBM's are clearly essential and cannot be replaced by cruise missiles. In my view, rapid response, in the event that deterrence breaks down, is not essential, and is even dangerous.

It is a natural military instinct to want to counterattack as rapidly as possible, in the hope of slowing the enemy's offensive. In nuclear war, however, a rapid response would have the opposite effect. If the Russians were to launch a nuclear attack against us, they would certainly be on the alert for our response. If we were to strike back at their

nuclear forces, especially their vulnerable land-based missiles, they would have the option of launching those missiles while our attacking force was still in flight.

It would make no difference whether we counterattacked with ICBM's that could get to their targets in 30 minutes or with cruise missiles that took as long as 12 hours (including the time it took to transport them to within launching distance). The Russians would see us coming and have ample time to launch their missiles while ours were on the way. There is no way to gain surprise once the nuclear genie is out of the bottle.

By setting an objective of attacking the Soviet Union's remaining nuclear weapons after a Soviet surprise attack, the war-fighting school would confront the Russians with the alternative of launching those remaining weapons quickly or seeing them destroyed. Yet the last thing we would want to do in that kind of situation is force the Russians to launch even more weapons against us. Instead, our objective should be to retaliate not by going after just their remaining missiles but by hitting both military and civilian targets intensively enough to demonstrate that continuing this war would lead to escalation and disaster.

The object of our counterattack would be to persuade the Soviet leaders to absorb the blow and negotiate. That would not be an easy decision for them to make. It would be more difficult to make in the 30 minutes' warning they would have of an attack by our ICBM's than in the four to 12 hours it would take our cruise missiles to reach their targets.

Thus, it would be preferable to conduct such a counterattack with "slow" cruise missiles or bombers and give the Russians as much time as possible to make their decision. In fact, we would want to use that time to let the Russians know exactly what we

were doing — that a counter-attack of the same proportion as their attack on us was irretrievably on the way; that we hoped they would absorb it and then negotiate; and that if they fired one more missile at the United States, our entire remaining arsenal would be immediately launched in a devastating blow. This would provide more margin for reason to reassert itself than would the momentum of a war-fighting strategy, which would propel us both into successive rounds of nuclear exchanges and would probably lead to mutual, if not global, destruction.

It is folly to talk, as the war-fighters do, of prolonging intercontinental nuclear exchanges until the Soviet side was exhausted. Of what value would it be to us to have some nuclear forces left after 8,000 nuclear warheads have been fired in each direction? Neither nation would be thinking of "victory" after sustaining 8,000 nuclear blasts, each 10 to 100 times more powerful than the one at Hiroshima. In fact, long before anything like 8,000 weapons had been exploded, a nuclear war would become entirely unmanageable. It is interesting to note that prior to his recent retirement as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. David C. Jones said publicly that he did not consider protracted nuclear war feasible. It is largely civilian nuclear theologians like Colin Gray who do.

There is another line of reasoning put forward by the war-fighting school that may be paraphrased as follows:

"The forces of NATO and the Warsaw Pact that face each other in Europe are armed with conventional weapons, and our side has always been outgunned. We have tried to compensate by placing short-range 'tactical,' or battlefield, nuclear weapons behind our conventional forces, in case we needed to make a special effort to turn the tide of battle. In turn, we have always backed up these tactical nuclear forces with the threat that our ICBM's in the United States would enter the fray, if

necessary. Hence, these intercontinental forces of last resort must be capable of war-fighting, including quick response."

The argument is pure sophistry. If, in the event of a nuclear attack against the United States, the President's readiness to retaliate against Soviet cities lacks credibility, as the war-fighters contend, what makes them believe that the President would attack the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons in retaliation for a conventional attack on Western Europe? The United States certainly should not and would not expose its own cities to nuclear devastation in order to compensate for NATO's weaknesses in conventional forces. It should be clear that if the West's conventional defenses in Europe ever reach the point where they cannot stand on their own, the Russians will soon detect that, and we can expect troubles that a "nuclear war-fighting capability" could not counter.



This examination of our strategic problems leads, I suggest, to the following conclusions:

We need weapons with a high degree of invulnerability to enemy attack, so that a large part of our deterrent can be depended on to survive a Soviet strike of no matter what intensity. These weapons should be able to retaliate in a deliberate, preferably slow, manner against either hard military targets or soft targets, including ordinary military installations, as well as cities and industries. We should have enough of these weapons to be certain of being able to inflict an unacceptable level of damage on the Soviet Union, but not necessarily to match the Russians weapon by weapon.

In other words, we must recommit ourselves to a doctrine of assured retaliation, relying principally on submarine-based missiles, bombers and cruise missiles, and rejecting the MX as unsuited to our needs. And we must reject the nuclear war-fighting doctrine as misconceived and dangerous to our security.

It may seem curious that a war-fighting theory with such lapses in logic should have gained such credence in the United States, and that, as a result, we are on the brink of going ahead with the MX missile at great financial cost and at great risk of nuclear instability. Yet the reasons are not hard to identify.

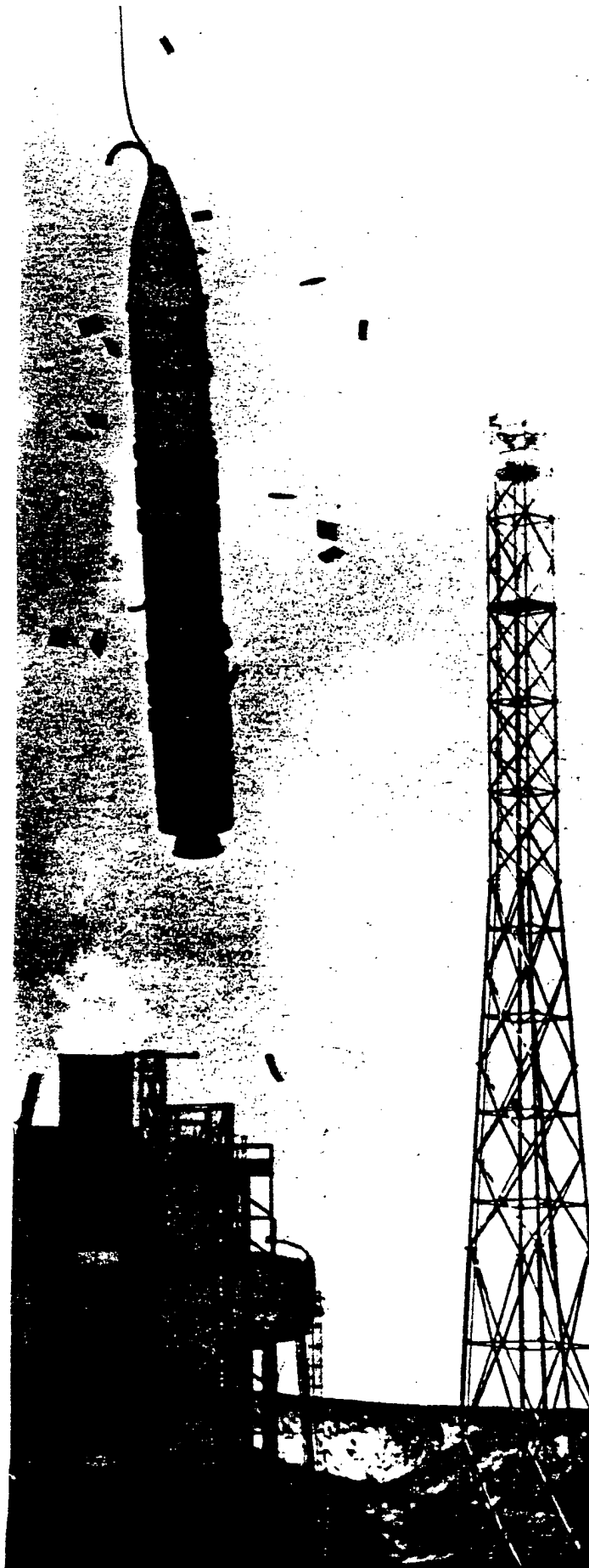
Perhaps the main reason is that war-fighting theorems are in accord with normal military reflexes in war, which are to strike quickly at the enemy's military forces. Another explanation lies in interservice politics: The Air Force sees the MX missile as a means of preventing its predominance in the intercontinental-nuclear field slipping away to the Navy. And there are, undoubtedly, the usual pressures from the military-industrial community to continue production of weapons under contract today.

Another factor, in my view, is that, over the years, the uniformed military in our country have virtually abdicated the formulation of nuclear doctrine to civilians. After all, military men cannot claim any particular operational expertise with nuclear weapons that has been denied to civilian specialists. It is good to have civilians thinking in all areas of military endeavor, but that there should be so few military men who can hold their own in debate on these matters is disturbing. Unrealistic concepts like that of nuclear war-fighting are a direct consequence of this lack.

Finally, the war-fighting doctrine has made inroads into official policies because it has not had to stand the test of full-scale public scrutiny and debate. This deficiency is being corrected: The American public displayed considerable skepticism over the dense-pack scheme, and the Congress, properly responsive to the public's views, voted in December to postpone any decision on the MX. Now, with the subject coming up for resolution, a still more difficult test of our democratic process is at hand.

It is doubly important for the public to involve itself in

the final judgment on whether we need the MX missile. Of course, there are many technical details and some secret matters that must be left to the experts, but the broad purposes of acquiring or forgoing specific nuclear weapons like the MX are quite within the public's ability to comprehend. In no other area today is it more important for the principle of public control over public officials to be exercised. ■



Our latest ballistic weapon, argues a former C.I.A. director, makes sense only as the instrument of a nuclear war fighting strategy whose adoption would threaten America's security.

**A prototype of the MX missile undergoes a launching test. Its deployment has been held up by a search for a new basing mode.**